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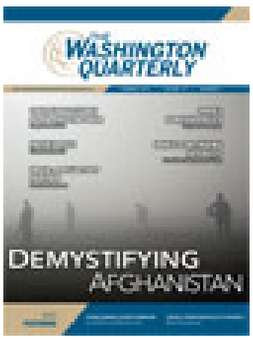


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Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam: Ending Africa's Oldest Geopolitical Rivalry?

Ethiopia surprised northeastern Africa in 2011 by announcing its plan to construct the first hydroelectric dam on the Blue Nile. With an annual production capacity of 6,000 megawatts, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is set to become the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa. Expected to be completed by 2015, the dam will not only break Egypt's millennia-long monopoly over the Nile waters, but will also, according to Cairo, threaten its water supply. The Nile is Egypt's only major source of freshwater and has served as the lifeline of the nation since the dawn of its civilization.

Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan organized a group of experts to review and assess the potential effects of the dam. The International Panel of Experts—made up of ten members, two from each of the three states and four international—submitted their impact assessment to all three governments in June 2013. The report has not yet been made public, but Ethiopia claims it concluded that the dam will not cause "significant harm" to any downstream state.[1] What is certain however is that the reservoir of the GERD will have the capacity to store up to 74 billion cubic meters of water (equivalent to 40 percent more than Egypt's entire annual Nile water supply)[2]—providing Ethiopia with the capacity to potentially disturb the water flows of the world's longest river in a significant manner.

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Although water politics have historically been a central feature of geopolitics in this region, they have grown particularly tense over the last decades due to the pressures of population growth, industrialization, and climate change. When Ethiopia diverted the first stretch of the Nile in May 2013 in anticipation of the dam's construction, tensions reached unprecedented heights and led Egyptian politicians to publicly threaten military action.[3] The ensuing diplomatic drama over the last year or so has led many to question: will the millennia-long rivalry over the Nile finally culminate in an armed confrontation between these two regional giants?

The current challenge to Egypt's hydro-hegemony is a consequence of a general shift in the regional geopolitical balance which has been underway for some years now. Despite these power shifts, alarmist pundits, and even Egyptian military threats, the prospect for armed confrontation between Egypt and Ethiopia is very unlikely. Such a confrontation would set in motion dynamics that would eventually lead to their mutual destruction—an outcome that serves as a deterrent. Instead of conflict, the GERD may have arguably initiated a process which will, through time, culminate in the cessation of Africa's oldest geopolitical rivalry.

The regional geopolitical balance has been shifting for some years now.

Egypt's Historical Monopoly

Egypt and Ethiopia have long struggled for control of the Nile. As far back as the 12th century, Ethiopian emperor Amda Syon threatened to divert the waters unless the Egyptian Sultan stopped persecuting Coptic Christians.[4] Securing the uninterrupted flow of the Nile waters from the Ethiopian highlands has therefore been a concern for Egyptian statesmen as far back as medieval times, making it arguably the oldest continuous and most important foreign policy concern of this ancient state.

Since Egypt experienced many different colonial masters, foreigners there often had to handle this crucial matter. Most important of these was Great Britain, which effectively governed this country from 1882–1952. Egypt offered Britain great strategic value—access to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean meant easier trade with India—and an important supply of cotton to its domestic industries. Seeking a legal monopoly, Britain signed two treaties governing utilization of the Nile waters. The first, signed in 1902 between Britain and Ethiopia, was never ratified by Ethiopia due to different meanings in the English and Amharic versions. The second, signed in 1929 between Egypt and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, gave Egypt the right to 48 billion cubic meters of

water per year, complete control over the Nile during the dry season, and veto power over any upriver water projects. Sudan received rights to 4 billion cubic meters of water, and Ethiopia was not consulted at all.

Nearly three decades later, Egypt and Sudan (now independent) signed the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement. This treaty was far more comprehensive and sought to replace the former by providing a legal framework for complete control over the waters. Sudan was given the right to utilize 25 percent of the waters, and Egypt the remaining 75 percent; none of the upstream states were consulted, included, or given any shares.[5]

Unsurprisingly, the upstream states have never accepted these colonial-era treaties. In fact, one source claims that the 1959 treaty "so negatively affected the upriver states that it provided the inspiration for the Nyerere Doctrine, named after independent Tanzania's first president, which asserted that former colonies had no obligation to abide by treaties signed for them by Great Britain."[6] The two groups of riparian states each emphasize different principles of international law in their Nile Basin claims.[7] The downstream states of Egypt and Sudan claim, based on the notion of customary law, that they have historical and natural rights over these waters. In addition, they invoke the more moderate principle of the "obligation not to cause significant harm" from Article 7 in the UN's Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. Upstream states have, on their part, moved from initially invoking the more extreme principle of absolute sovereignty—i.e. a state has the right to utilize all resources within its borders in any way it wants—to the more moderate principle of "equitable use," also derived from the same UN convention.

In an effort to reach a common understanding and develop a mutually beneficial framework, the Nile Basin Initiative was launched in 1999 by all riparian states: Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as well as Eritrea as an observer. The old divides have nonetheless yet to be overcome; while nearly all downstream states (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania) have signed a May 2010 Cooperative Framework Agreement, which seeks to replace previous colonial era treaties based on the principle of equitable use, Sudan and Egypt oppose it and claim it infringes upon their historical rights.[8] The international law of transnational watercourses is ambiguous and, as this dispute illustrates, contains principles that are somewhat contradictory. One principle emphasizes the sovereign rights of states to utilize any resources within their territories, while the other requires that such actions do not cause significant harm to other states that share the resource. Consequently, although all parties cite international law in defense of their hydro-political claims, it has had marginal practical and political consequences.

Cairo has historically not solely relied on legal means when pursuing monopoly over the Nile waters. Instead, it for decades also pursued a foreign policy strategy of destabilization—that is, supporting armed rebels operating in rival states. Many of the downstream states are among the most fragile in the world, and Ethiopia in particular was grappling with the problem of secessionism for decades. The Ethiopian state's different authoritarian regimes, competing nationalisms, ethnic inequalities, incapacity to control its territories, and failure to deliver much needed socioeconomic development made it a fertile ground for armed ethnic liberation fronts. For decades, Cairo had therefore not so much to consider the option of direct military action against Ethiopia to maintain its hydro hegemony, but could instead rely on providing tactical support to armed rebel groups.[9] In addition, Egypt's war through proxy extended to supporting armed groups in Somalia who were fighting Ethiopia and its local allies.[10]

Egypt has over the years complemented this strategy of destabilization with intensive diplomatic activity. It has used its immense diplomatic clout to persuade or pressure international donor agencies to refrain from funding any hydro-development project on the River Nile in upstream countries.[11] These strategies combined have, for decades, been instrumental in effectively upholding Egypt's hydro-monopoly in the Nile Basin.

Ethiopia's Emergence as a Regional Power

The regional geopolitical equation has today changed dramatically. The primary cause lies in Ethiopian state-formation processes. The Ethiopian state has throughout its entire political history been plagued by centrifugal tendencies. In the imperial era, all emperors were forced to fight, compete, and negotiate with regional feudal lords who had significant political-military power. This phenomenon continued throughout Ethiopia's communist era (1974–1991) and current regimes in the form of armed ethnic liberation fronts.[12] Consequently, instead of focusing their resources on development endeavors, Ethiopian governments were preoccupied with regime survival.

In recent years, however, this centuries-long feature of Ethiopian statehood has reversed. For example, at its worst during the 1980s, more than a dozen heavily armed factions—that together controlled more than 100,000 militiamen—fought a severe insurgency against the central government. Today's ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which came to power in 1991, has over the last decade managed to eliminate or co-opt most armed opposition groups to the point where no such faction can today pose a significant threat to its authority—a situation unprecedented in the country's political history.

The increasing concentration over coercive powers in the hands of the state has also accompanied a rapid expansion of public institutions, particularly in the health and education sectors. The bureaucratic apparatus of the state now reaches all corners and inhabitants of the country, leading among other things to a significant improvement in the state's ability to collect taxes.[13] Over the last decade, the EPRDF has steered the country's economy through a robust growth trajectory. The amount of these growth rates remains controversial: the government of Ethiopia claims an average GDP growth rate of 11 percent over the past 8 years,[14] whereas the IMF and many other analysts claim that a 7-8 percent average is more accurate.[15] Regardless, the trajectory remains impressive. One consequence of such growth is an ability to fund major projects from domestic sources, such as the GERD dam.

The changes that have taken place on the domestic front have important implications for Ethiopia's foreign relations. A decade of relative internal stability and robust economic growth, together with extensive battlefield experience in fighting both domestic and external groups, has turned Ethiopia's military apparatus into one of the most substantial and battle-hardened on the continent. This development has moreover coincided with the weakening of most of its long-time regional rivals, such as Libya, Eritrea, Egypt, and Somalia, who have all undergone different forms of domestic turmoil over the last years.

Ethiopia has accordingly been assuming a role that its sheer enormous demographic and geographic features—with a population of around 90 million and geographic area almost twice as large as France—naturally assign it, namely that of a regional and continental power. It has emerged as a central actor in regional and continental diplomacy, and has often displayed an ability to set agendas and effectively mobilize support from its peers in the African Union (AU). In 2009, for example, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi represented the continent in global climate negotiations.[16]

Located at the center of what is arguably the most conflict-prone region in the world, Ethiopia has also emerged as a critical anchor of stability and a buffer containing the emergence of a belt of failed states from the Horn of Africa to the Red Sea. For example, Ethiopia is hosting and leading mediation in the ongoing South Sudanese civil war.[17] It has helped broker recent agreements among the central government and sub-state actors in Somalia.[18] In 2006, it also took the lead (prior to the intervention of AU and Kenyan troops) in combatting the various Islamist insurgent groups which threatened the existence of the internationally recognized and fragile transitional government in Mogadishu. It also aids in the border dispute between Sudan and South Sudan, and its military personnel furthermore command and make up more than 95 percent of the peacekeeping forces in the disputed territory of Abyei,

straddling the border between the two Sudanese states.[19] Ethiopia's ability to manage the difficult task of enjoying the confidence and trust of all conflicting parties in these surrounding areas is an important indicator of its new diplomatic influence in the region and beyond.[20]

Addis Ababa is thus not only the diplomatic capital of Africa but also a key site and agent of regional conflict resolution. These factors, in addition to its essential role in regional counterterrorism operations, has made it a strategically pivotal ally of the West, notably the United States and Israel. For Ethiopia, this has entailed substantial financial and military assistance as well as diplomatic support—making it the third-largest recipient of U.S. assistance in Africa.[21]

Zenawi identified regional integration as a key factor for ending the perpetual cycles of conflict that have shaped much of the history of this region. Addis Ababa's regional integration scheme is centered on two pillars: the first is infrastructural development "to link up producers and consumers of the East Africa region," and the second is to develop and integrate the energy markets of the region. Ethiopia, for example, imports 80 percent of its crude oil from Sudan and exports hydropower to nearly all its neighbors.[22]

Today, the Ethiopian state, whose international relations was for decades mainly limited to the objective of ensuring state survival, now possesses the diplomatic influence, strategic weight, and economic as well as military resources to pursue one of its perennial aspirations: successfully challenging Egypt's hegemony in the Nile Basin.

Prospects for Water War

Many influential personalities have warned about inevitable conflicts over Nile water.

Northeastern Africa's population growth is expected to more than double by 2050,[23] which in conjunction with climate change, increasing water scarcity, and food insecurity[24] has produced many daunting Malthusian speculations about inevitable conflicts over Nile water as an essential resource.[25] These speculators include influential personalities such as former UN Secretary-General (1992–96) Boutros Boutros Ghali, who warned that "The next war in our region will be over the waters of the Nile, not politics."[26] Similarly, the late Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat declared, "The only matter that could take Egypt to war again is water";[27] and finally both former and current General Secretaries of the UN, Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-moon, warned in 2008 about the conflict-generating potential of water scarcity.[28]

The conflict over the Nile also has important symbolic and sentimental aspects. Security and geopolitics aside, the Nile is for the Egyptian people much more than just a river—it holds a special and entrenched role in the history and identity of the nation. Ethiopians, too, see the river in a symbolic light: their incapacity thus far to utilize the Nile waters epitomizes the nation's political and economic underdevelopment. Hence, as the name implies, the GERD represents a leap out of the dark ages of underdevelopment and national humiliation.[29] For the leaders of both nations, the dispute over the Nile is therefore a political minefield where one slight mistake or misunderstanding might constitute domestic political suicide.

The GERD represents a leap out of Ethiopia's dark ages of underdevelopment and humiliation.

In Egypt, politicians and violent public protesters have ferociously been demanding that their government stop Ethiopia from constructing the GERD—by any means necessary. In June 2013, after Ethiopia began diverting part of the Nile in dam preparations, Egyptian politicians—unaware of the fact that their debate was being broadcast on live TV—suggested to former President Morsi that Egypt should either conduct a military attack on Ethiopia or sabotage it by funding armed rebels operating in its territories.[30] Morsi eventually bowed to popular pressure and warned Ethiopia that he considered "all options open" to protect Egypt's interests in the Nile.[31] More recently, Egyptian presidential candidate Mortadar Mansour reiterated this threat, even going one step further than Morsi to state that he will "order the use of military force against Ethiopia" if it continues construction of the GERD.[32]

Despite the many threats and warnings from both analysts and politicians, the empirical evidence for inter-state war over water is very clear: several statistical studies have illustrated the historical anomaly of water wars. The International Crisis Behaviour dataset, for example, found 412 incidents of inter-state crises from 1918–1994.[33] In only seven of these cases did it find water to be a central point of dispute, and all seven were minor skirmishes rather than large-scale confrontations. Nonetheless, although the negative correlation is convincingly clear, the question of *why* conflicting claims over this critical resource have not lead to war, as well as the future course of events, are more debatable. The changing geopolitical balance and the emergence of Ethiopia as a regional power could be one reason armed confrontation is an unlikely scenario. Other analysts point out that an Egyptian water war is unlikely because Egypt simply cannot finance one under its current economic conditions.[34]

One needs to bear in mind that, in this region alone, historical examples abound of states initiating wars under far worse economic conditions, and that poverty has very often failed to act as a deterrent to armed conflict. One should also consider that, despite Ethiopia's growth, the asymmetries in economic and military capacities between Egypt and Ethiopia are still substantial, and are not by themselves likely to deter Cairo from confrontation. The growth of Ethiopia does therefore not explain the absence of conflict, but simply how Egypt's monopoly over the Nile waters came to be challenged and is coming to an end. If anything, the emergence of a new revisionist and rising status quo-challenging power in a global geopolitical system is most often associated with confrontation and war.[35]

Instead of changes in geopolitical balance or economic factors, the prospect for water wars in the Nile Basin is best understood by examining the strategic decision-making dynamics which the protagonists face: in other words, the incentives and deterrents for conflict and cooperation. One theoretical explanation for the absence of water wars emphasizes the strategic irrationality of such a confrontation. This argument is based on the premise that armed conflict over a transnational river must presumably be initiated by a militarily superior downstream state, in reaction to actions by an upstream state which would decrease the quality or quantity of the waters flowing to the downstream hegemon. If a dam project in the upstream state is the cause of such a confrontation, and the downstream state opts for a military attack on that project site, it would flood areas in the downstream state(s), as well as adversely impact the quality of their water supply. Such actions would moreover leave the attacked upstream state with the critical retribution option of polluting the waters flowing to the downstream state. The consequences to the downstream hegemon of such an attack would be so severe, and the cost-benefit ratio so skewed, that it would be irrational to pay this price for a resource which Aaron Wolf points out can be made from seawater for a mere US$1 per cubic meter.[36]

The current Nile Basin strategic context very much embodies these theoretical deterrents. Egypt, a downstream and militarily superior state, wants to prevent upstream Ethiopia—who provides the lions-share of the waters—from constructing a dam on the Blue Nile. Moreover, although Morsi (and nearly all Egyptian governments since WWII) have made numerous threats, they have so far proven to be bluffs: Ethiopia has begun to divert the Nile waters and finished more than 30 percent of the dam construction without witnessing the materialization of any of the many military threats.

This likely comes from a realistic assessment of Egypt's circumstances. First of all, since Ethiopia and Egypt do not share borders, Cairo faces the practical challenge of finding a neighbor of Ethiopia willing to provide it with a base from which it can carry out military operations. Furthermore, an attack on a dam in

Ethiopia is likely to flood parts of Sudan and Egypt, adversely impacting the quality of Egypt's water supplies, as noted hypothetically above.

The issue of retribution, also noted above, is critical: Ethiopia could choose to respond to an attack by polluting the Nile waters flowing to Egypt, which would jeopardize the fresh water supply and thereby the lives of millions of Egyptians. The threat or act of polluting water resources—or water terrorism—is not a mere hypothetical scenario but has in fact numerous historical precedents in countries such as Iran, Israel, Jordan, and the United States.[37] These examples involve predominantly domestic water resources, but it is important to realize that such international water terrorism is possible, has been done before, and therefore merits consideration in an analysis of potential conflict scenarios.

Ethiopia's Nile policy has also been very interesting for another reason: despite being the source of more than two-thirds of the Nile's waters, Addis Ababa is not invoking absolute territorial sovereignty or initiating actions which would significantly reduce Egypt's Nile water flows. Such actions would undoubtedly spur Egypt to respond using all available means, given the life-threatening implications for the Egyptian people. Sudan, who would also suffer as a fellow victim of Ethiopia's actions, would likely co-operate with Egypt in such a mission. Due to its standing in the Arab world, Egypt could certainly count on their financial and diplomatic support.

Potential water conflict actually offers an effective deterrent of mutual destruction.

The strategic equation that Ethiopia and Egypt face is therefore the following: armed confrontation would initiate dynamics that would force both parties to take measures which would have severe, even existential, repercussions for all. Consequently, this serves as a mutual deterrent to both parties. Prophecies of water wars come from an existential premise—that population growth and water scarcity will lead to conflict over water. Yet, the argument forwarded here against a water wars scenario also comes from an existential premise—namely, that the potential water conflict offers an effective deterrent of mutual destruction. That is why, despite the upsurge of popular nationalist sentiments and warmongering, the leaders of both nations so far have made the strategically rational decision not to cross the boundary which would lead to armed confrontation.

Interdependence and its Geopolitical Implications

Instead of conflict, statistical data in fact illustrates that transnational water resources are highly correlated with cooperation and treaty-making; transnational water resources provide many shared interests to the riparian states and induce

cooperation.[38] The geography of transnational rivers is very often relatively conducive to hydropower projects in upstream states, whereas downstream states are comparatively better positioned to engage in agricultural production along river banks, and all riparians can consequently utilize the shared river in a mutually beneficial manner.[39] In cases where the river acts as a state boundary, it serves as a shared resource that all parties have an interest in preserving.

The GERD has the potential to provide mutual benefits to both Ethiopia and Egypt. Ethiopia will be able to produce hydropower, the surplus of which it has stated that it—as part of its regional economic integration scheme—seeks to sell to its neighbors.[40] Egypt, which today relies predominantly on fossil fuels for its energy supplies, will therefore have access to a cheaper and more environmentally friendly electricity supply. And contrary to the claim that the GERD will reduce Egypt's water supply, some studies suggest that—if managed in the right manner—storing the waters in the Ethiopian highlands, where the temperature is much cooler, may in fact over time increase Egypt's water supplies, as less water would evaporate in Egypt's Aswan Dam.[41] Energy demands in the Nile Basin already outstrip supply, with demand expected to increase several-fold over the next decade.[42] Egypt has already reached maximum hydropower production potential,[43] whereas Ethiopia with its ecological and geographical features has a hydropower production capacity of 45,000 MW—"enough to meet most of sub-Saharan Africa's current demand."[44] The comparative advantage of geography is at the center of the economic logic for energy integration in northeastern Africa.

The promise of mutual benefits has so far failed to initiate cooperation between these parties. This is somewhat understandable given that Egypt's stance is a consequence of a security imperative that springs from the insecurity of letting an external actor gain control over a resource so critical to national survival. Once the dam becomes a matter of fact, however, the decision-making rationale is likely to change significantly. Given that Egypt cannot reverse this process—neither through military nor diplomatic means—it will have to learn to live with the GERD. These new conditions will make it very likely that the Egyptian government will renounce their monopolistic, zero-sum, and now anachronistic hydro-politics, and will begin engaging with Ethiopia on crafting mutually acceptable co-management frameworks of this shared resource; in other words, accepting the *fait accompli*. One can already see signs with Cairo's occasional, yet contradictory, signaling of its willingness to negotiate with Addis Ababa on the "political and technical aspects of Nile Water division."[45]

Once the dam becomes complete, decision-making is likely to change significantly.

The millennia-long Egyptian-Ethiopian regional rivalry has centered primarily on the dispute over the Nile. If this issue is resolved and both parties are in fact forced by new circumstances to cooperate on managing this resource, it will likely gradually initiate a new era in this relationship, characterized by more cooperation and less rivalry. Given that this "cold war" has been carried out through proxies and played a noteworthy role in destabilizing and fueling conflicts in Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, the cessation of Africa's longest interstate rivalry would have immense geopolitical implications for peace and security in Northeastern Africa.

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